

Soroptimist

International of the Americas, Inc.®

Our Vision

Women and girls have the resources and opportunities to reach their full potential and live their dreams

Our Mission

Soroptimist is a global volunteer organization that provides women and girls with access to the education and training they need to achieve economic empowerment.

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From Seedlings to Flowers: Growing our Soroptimist Garden

The year was 1929. In Brussels, Belgium, a girl named Audrey

Kathleen Ruston was born into a privileged and aristocratic family.

While studying at a small private school in the English countryside, a kind woman introduced Audrey to gardening, which would become her life-long passion.

Her parents divorced when she was young, and her mother relocated young Audrey, an aspiring dancer, to the Netherlands, hoping to escape the worst of World War II.

As it turned out, Audrey's family was profoundly affected by the German occupation that began in 1940. In 1944, during what was called the Winter of Hunger, tens of thousands of Dutch people died from the famine caused when the German blockades restricted food into the area. Audrey and her family survived by eating nettles and tulip bulbs.

She developed acute anemia and respiratory problems, which affected Audrey for the rest of her life and ended her dreams of



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dancing professionally. Instead, she went on to become a much beloved actress, style icon, and human rights activist, known to the world as Audrey Hepburn.

And she is probably my favorite celebrity of all time.

Her films are still watched regularly, and her image continues to be used in advertising campaigns in Japan, the U.S. and Europe. She is especially near to my heart for her humanitarian work as a UNICEF ambassador. Audrey visited many countries in that role, was awarded the U.S. Presidential Medal of Freedom for her efforts, and the Spirit of Audrey statue stands proudly at UNICEF's New York headquarters.

I mentioned Audrey had a life-long passion for gardening. A few years back her son, Luca Dotti, produced a book called *Audrey at Home: Memories of My Mother's Kitchen*, where he wrote lovingly about his mom's gardens.

"On May 5th 1945, Holland was liberated—one day after my mother's birthday," says Luca. "So really, after the most terrible winter of her life, the liberation came with the spring, and with spring came food."

Nature and life began to bloom again in Holland after the war. "Gardens," Audrey said, "are proof of life."

“We have to learn a lot from plants,” said Luca. “They can suffer, but they have the strength to repair themselves.”

Audrey spent untold hours working in her gardens. She also hosted a documentary series called “Gardens of the World with Audrey Hepburn,” and even had a variety of roses and tulips named after her.

I think everyone loves gardens, don't you? People travel the world see gardens like those in Audrey's documentary. They have been the stuff of poetry, song and art since the beginning of time.

Recently I was taking a walk. Enjoying the sunshine. The birds singing. The squirrels scampering up the trees. And my neighbors' lovely gardens. I was daydreaming when it occurred to me that Soroptimist is like a garden. Our members and supporters are the gardeners, and our Dream Program recipients are the seedlings that grow into beautiful flowers.

Making sure seedlings thrive is no easy task. They are vulnerable to obstacles, like weeds, bugs, and bad weather, right? We know our women and girls have already made it through a lot of obstacles like domestic violence. And poverty. Teen pregnancy. Or a combination of extremely difficult circumstances. They've already proven themselves to be strong and resilient, with the strength to repair themselves—like the plants Luca Dotti spoke of.

The Japanese have a saying: “If the flower is to be beautiful, it must be cultivated.” Without continued support and care, these women and girls can fall backward,

erasing their hard-earned progress. Our seedlings might never mature into the beautiful flowers they're meant to become.

And that would be heartbreaking.

How many of you were in Yokohama last summer? It was a great convention, wasn't it? My favorite part was meeting our 2018 Live Your Dream Award recipients.

Thanks to our corporate partner, Torrid, we were able to bring all three of our beautiful finalists to Yokohama.

We met Ana Caren, from Mexico, who was forced to deal with the trauma of an abusive father and mentally ill mother. After her mother died and her grandfather could no longer care for her three young siblings, Ana Caren began caring for them—all while going to college.

We were all impressed with Ana Caren's resolve. She is studying for a degree in business and dreams of starting her own company one day. Ana Caren's first priorities are getting through school and being there for her siblings. "This award," she told us, "is now my most beautiful reality."

We learned that Lucia, from British Columbia, Canada, suffered unspeakable violence at the hands of her ex-partner, who controlled every aspect of her life. Her education. Her friends. Her religion. Her finances. Her very independence.

Horrifically, he had acquaintances break into their home and sexually assault Lucia in front of her baby girl. She left several times before finally breaking free.

Can you even imagine the strength it took Lucia to overcome the physical and emotional abuse she had endured? After earning her GED, Lucia is now studying to become a special education assistant, with the eventual goal of becoming a teacher. "I am ready to put on my wings," she said. "I feel I have finally earned them." I, for one, can't wait to see how far she flies.

We also met Shamayel, who was born to human rights activists in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. When she was a young girl her parents defied the rule against educating girls and sent Shamayel to an underground school. It was an incredibly brave move with deadly consequences. The Taliban subsequently murdered Shamayel's father, and her mother died of a heart attack upon hearing the horrible news.

Shamayel was sent to the U.S. after it was learned her life was also in danger. Her six younger siblings were left behind until Shamayel was able to arrange for them to come to the U.S., where they now live with her. Studying for a degree in international relations, Shamayel wants to continue her parents' human rights work, particularly around women and girls in Afghanistan.

"My overall goal is very clear: I want to work on behalf of justice, equality, and peace on earth for all," she said. She is well on her way and I'm so happy to report she recently became a U.S. citizen!

These gorgeous women and the 1,592 others who received Live Your Dream Awards this past year, are thriving because of YOU.

Add to that the 14,547 girls you've supported through Dream It, Be It. These girls are looking forward to a bright future because you cared enough to nurture them.

If you've held a Dream It, Be It event, you know how rewarding it is to hear the girls say things like, "I have learned that I am more powerful than any obstacle." Or "I feel so much more prepared to pursue my goals now." Or "They made us feel that no matter our background or situation, we can make it."

These sweet seedlings are at such a critical point in their lives. A little support and cultivation from caring adults like you, can make all the difference in the world.

But growing our garden and cultivating our seedlings is no easy task.

The writer Rudyard Kipling once said, "Gardens are not made by singing 'oh, how beautiful,' and sitting in the shade.

Gardening is hard, hard work. But the rewards are SO worth it.

Audrey Hepburn's son Luca said a gardener's main charge is to prepare the garden in advance for the seasons to come. Does that remind you of anything?

How about our Big Goal? We've been hearing a lot about it but maybe you're still not sure what it means. Beginning in 2021 we have an audacious goal to be super gardeners—to grow our impact by helping 500,000 women and girls grow from seedlings to flowers in 10 years.

To accomplish this goal, we have to prepare our garden. We have to make sure the soil is ready to grow the flowers. We have to recruit more gardeners, or members, to

help us with the huge task ahead. We have to raise the funds necessary to buy our seeds and other supplies.

Once our garden is planted, we'll need to fertilize and add nutrients. We'll need to water vigilantly.

And we'll need to pull those weeds and get rid of the pests. Luckily, in addition to participating in our Dream Programs, a lot of our clubs also help women and girls overcome the weeds that get in their way, like poverty, domestic violence and sex trafficking. Removing obstacles is key to clearing the way toward the future.

All of us have a role to play in growing our Soroptimist garden ... depending on your interest ... or your ability ... or the time you have available. Maybe you have bad knees or a sore back that prevents you from planting the seeds. Or you're super busy with your job or your family. That's OK. There's always a way to do your part.

One of the benefits of being a Soroptimist is the opportunity for self-growth while we're helping others. Noriyuki Makihara, the Japanese pop singer/songwriter, wrote: "Each of us is a unique flower born from a unique seed. What we need is to nurture your own plant and make it bloom."

While we're helping others to grow, we're receiving spiritual sustenance ourselves. Luca Dotti said his mom found that taking care of her gardens was a way to fight her memories of the war. For a lot of people, it's a way to commune with nature or be closer to your God. Gardening, or in our case belonging to a club and supporting women and girls in their quest to lead better lives, is a win-win for all concerned.

Audrey Hepburn once said, "To garden is to believe in the future." Our garden is about to enter its second century. The theme for our 100th anniversary celebration is "Beautiful Past, Brilliant Future." Look around at all we've accomplished. Feel good about it. And now, dream about how much more we need to do. How much more we WANT to do to ensure a brilliant future for our organization and the deserving women and girls who need us. 10 years. 500,000 seedlings to flowers.

So, who's with me? Who's going to help me grow our Soroptimist garden?

Who's going to commit to our next big goal by cultivating and nurturing all those exquisite flowers-to-be?

All of you? Fantastic!

Then grab your watering cans, your hoes, your shovels, your gardening gloves ... and meet me in the garden!